

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ABUJA 000401

SIPDIS

CAIRO FOR POL -- J. MAXSTADT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/25/2013

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [NI](#)

SUBJECT: NIGERIA: DID VP ATIKU OUTFOX BABANGIDA AND OBASANJO DURING THE PDP CONVENTION?

REF: ABUJA 216

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: During a late January conversation with Ambassador Jeter and PolCouns, Lagos-based businessman Leno Adesanya contended that VP Atiku finessed both President Obasanjo and former Head of State Ibrahim Babangida during the PDP convention in early January. Prior to the convention, Atiku had decided to stick by Obasanjo, according to Adesanya. However, Atiku feigned indecision in order to kill two birds with one stone. First, his faked ambivalence compelled Obasanjo to concede control of the domestic agenda to Atiku should they win the 2003 election. Second, Atiku wanted to deceive Babangida into believing that he had fallen into Babangida's snare. Adesanya, who has one foot in Atiku's camp and the other in Babangida's, said that Babangida's objective was to coax Atiku to team with Ekwueme against the President. With Obasanjo out of the race, Babangida would have taken the ANPP nomination. When Babangida's plan went awry, the ANPP nomination fell to Muhammedu Buhari. According to Adesanya, Babangida, Ekwueme and NSA Aliyu Mohammed, a staunch Babangida ally, were the big losers coming out of the conventions. End Summary.

12. (C) During a late night conversation that extended well into the early morning, Lagos businessman Leno Adesanya provided Ambassador Jeter and PolCouns an account of the PDP convention from an Atiku insider's perspective. The account is decidedly biased toward Atiku, but much of it rings true because of Adesanya's access and credibility, we are reporting in detail what he had to say:

ATIKU, THE REALIST

13. (C) Going into the PDP convention, Atiku recognized his limitations. While seeing himself as a much better politician than the President, he knew Obasanjo would attempt to destroy him politically if he challenged the President's renomination. Thus, although the past year had been one of considerable friction and mistrust between the two leaders, Atiku recognized that his fortunes were wedded to those of his boss. Equally important, Atiku also realized that Obasanjo was stuck with him; Obasanjo could not secure the party renomination without his endorsement. However, Atiku was unsure if Obasanjo grasped this reality; if not, the President might mistakenly precipitate their mutual downfall by taking the advice of former Works Minister Anenih and Babangida fifth columnist, NSA Aliyu Mohammed, to dump him. Thus, Atiku needed to demonstrate clearly to the President that he was indispensable to Obasanjo's return to office.

14. (C) Atiku also knew former Head of State Babangida had been playing Atiku and Obasanjo against one another. Babangida's plan was to coax Atiku to team with Alex Ekwueme in order to defeat Obasanjo's renomination. With Obasanjo out of the running, Babangida would have seized the ANPP nomination, then watched as the ensuing enmity between Obasanjo and the Ekwueme/Atiku ticket moved the PDP to destroy itself.

Don't Change Horses In Mid-Stream

15. (C) To secure his future with Obasanjo while also deceiving Babangida, Atiku felt he needed to wait until the last minute before publicly affirming his support for Obasanjo. The PDP governors' eleventh-hour rebellion against

Obasanjo gave Atiku the vehicle to perfect his strategy. A few days prior to the convention, Obasanjo met the governors, agreeing to support their renominations. The quid pro quo was obvious. However, seeking to undermine this pact, NSA Aliyu Mohammed visited Delta State governor James Ibori and some others, frightening them that Obasanjo had compiled embarrassing dossiers and planned to use the information to disqualify the governors once he secured the PDP Presidential nomination. The NSA's intrigue galvanized the governors and temporarily injected suspense into the PDP convention. But, instead of redounding to Babangida's benefit as Aliyu expected, the governor's brouhaha with Obasanjo helped Atiku to perfect his own plan.

16. (C) According to Adesanya, Atiku met the governors the first day of the convention; they urged him to leave Obasanjo and seek the nomination himself. Atiku demurred; he also deflected the suggestion that he join Ekwueme. Finally, Atiku arranged a meeting between Obasanjo and the now irate governors. The governors railed that Obasanjo was hypocritically pursuing them for corruption, while turning a blind eye to corrupt politicians within his own Administration. Atiku supported the governor's position, telling Obasanjo that significant corruption was not the exclusive ambit of the governors and that serious transgressions occurred in the executive branch: he said it would be unjust to focus exclusively on gubernatorial excesses. Assuming the role of mediator, Atiku then asked both sides to affirm their mutual support and cease the antagonism being fueled by elements that wanted to destroy the PDP. The governors agreed to bury the hatchet, if Obasanjo would shelve the dossiers. Having demonstrated his influence with the governors, Atiku continued to play coy with Obasanjo.

17. (C) In the end, Atiku extracted an extraordinary concession from the President. Obasanjo agreed to relinquish the entire domestic agenda to Atiku, including the appointment of key economic policy-makers. Since Obasanjo focused on the world arena during his first term and aspired for recognition as an international statesman, Atiku said that is where he would like Obasanjo's attentions to remain. Obasanjo would serve the role of a "super Foreign Minister" and ceremonial Head of State. As Adesanya understood the agreement, Atiku would be allowed to direct domestic economic policy while Obasanjo busied himself with debt relief, NEPAD, conflict resolution and other measures to shore up Nigeria's image abroad.

Outfoxing Babangida

18. (C) As he exploited Obasanjo's political vulnerabilities, Atiku simultaneously outfoxed the "Maradonna" and master of political intrigue, Babangida. Leading up to the convention, Atiku had maintained contact with Babangida, the central topic being their displeasure with Obasanjo. Atiku wanted Babangida to think he had swallowed the bait and would leave Obasanjo if another suitor offered the right political inducement. Wary of the Babangida camp's ability to disrupt the convention, Atiku continued to signal willingness to abandon Obasanjo if the price were right. This protracted indecisive was, in fact a conscious ploy to prevent Babangida from implementing a possible back-up plan to wreck the Obasanjo/Atiku alliance. Atiku kept negotiating with Obasanjo's challenger, Alex Ekwueme. Atiku knew Ekwueme had Babangida's backing, as well as support from former Head of State Abdulsalam and NSA Mohammed.

19. (C) In this context, Atiku's BBC interview the evening of January 4, where he equivocated on his own Presidential ambitions, was pure bluff. During the broadcast, Atiku said he was considering all options before him. This remarkable statement from an incumbent Vice President fooled many into believing Atiku was leaning toward abandoning the President and seeking the Presidency himself. Adesanya recalled talking to Atiku immediately after the interview; the VP called the statement a ploy to keep Babangida off-balance until the last possible moment.

110. (C) The ploy worked, Adesanya contended. A few hours after the BBC broadcast, Atiku was with Obasanjo lobbying governors and state delegations to suggest this ticket. By midnight, the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket was secure. With only a few hours before the convention vote, it was too late for Babangida and company to implement any "Plan B" they might have had to thwart the Obasanjo renomination.

¶11. (C) Obasanjo's renomination killed Babangida's ultimate objective, the ANPP nomination, Adesanya maintained. Babangida wanted to run, but only if Obasanjo had been sidelined. This reticence was not due to deference or loyalty to the President, but out of respect for the power of incumbency and its influence on the outcome of the election. Babangida did not want to fight Obasanjo but did not mind fighting an Ekweume/Atiku ticket that had drawn the wrath of a sitting President. However, Babangida's manipulation of the ANPP as his maid in waiting came to naught. He had helped place his former second in command, Augustus Aikhomu, into the important post of Chairman of the ANPP Board of Trustees. Also, many ANPP governors and other party stalwarts prayed Babangida would join the party at the last minute. The party scheduled its convention after the PDP's just to keep the door open for IBB.

¶12. (C) However, when Obasanjo emerged from the PDP confab, Babangida left his faithful waiting at the altar. With Babangida out of the picture, the internal dynamics of the ANPP led to the nomination of former Head of State Buhari, the only ANPP candidate with national stature.

Thumbs Up!

¶13. (C) Predictably, Adesanya saw Atiku as the biggest winner in this rendition of events. First, Atiku secured his slot on the Obasanjo ticket against the urging and treachery of some Obasanjo insiders; additionally, with Obasanjo surrendering the domestic agenda, Atiku will become the de facto head of government in 2003. Moreover, Atiku's most powerful rival for the 2007 presidency, Ibrahim Babangida, has been weakened considerably. Adesanya asserted that Atiku was not overly concerned that Obasanjo would renege on his promises or try to dump or discredit him. Last year's impeachment crisis and the recently concluded PDP convention had demonstrated Atiku's weight with both PDP National Assembly members and PDP governors. If Obasanjo moved against Atiku, Atiku's allies would neutralize the President. Atiku held the impeachment card and that threat alone would discourage Obasanjo from seeking revenge or going back on his promises. Adesanya also saw Obasanjo as a victor, albeit of a lesser magnitude. The renomination exacted a high price; Obasanjo had to concede considerable power to Atiku and had to plead with delegates for their support. Although on the road to likely re-election, Obasanjo has had to endure several humiliating steps to get there. Domestically, he has been diminished.

Thumbs Down!

¶14. (C) Babangida was the biggest loser. The patina of invulnerability had been tarnished. In this instance, Babangida's purported greatest skill -- keeping all his options open and his opponents guessing -- proved to be a liability. Instead of appearing masterful, he came across as unreliable and indecisive. Babangida's vaunted secrecy also failed him. His courtiers, anxious to be seen by others as close Babangida confidants, behaved like hyperactive sieves, leaking details of his conversations to whomever would listen. Babangida's plans to trick Atiku were repeated to the Vice President; they also featured prominently in the press. Developing an effective counter-deception, Atiku foiled the ambush, leaving Babangida waiting on the wrong road for someone who would never show. (Comment: Adesanya is not alone in this depiction. Many Babangida supporters are shaking their heads. Babangida's swagger has been reduced to political timidity. In reality, although Babangida has been diminished, he is not a spent force and may still be able to wield influence, albeit his options are considerably less. End Comment)

¶15. (C) Another clear loser was the National Security Advisor. In fomenting the governors' opposition to the President, Mohammed entertained the prospect that Babangida dangled before him: the vice-presidential slot under Ekweume -- the same slot being offered Atiku. However, Adesanya dismissed Mohammed as a credible national candidate. Aliyu is considered to be a purveyor of intrigues and coups, not a politician. He has no charisma, no constituency and little cash. After his manipulation of the governors, Aliyu was of little value and became invisible. His feeble performance during the convention confirmed his weaknesses and the quixotic nature of his political aspirations, Adesanya declared. Adesanya revealed that Mohammed had attempted to resign, but Atiku counseled Obasanjo to ignore his request. Atiku advised it would be better to keep Mohammed on the payroll and on a tight leash in order to contain his

infidelity and any future intrigues. If Mohammed were out of office he would feel threatened; the NSA could use his immense knowledge of the inner secrets of the Administration to cause considerable embarrassment, if not, damage.

¶16. (C) PDP challenger Alex Ekweume also came up short in Adesanya's estimation. Adesanya speculated that Ekweume's strident criticism of the convention had as much to do with the 1999 convention as last month's event. In '99, Ekweume accepted defeat gracefully; this time, his supporters pressured him to make a stink. They hoped the PDP would offer some party positions to their faction in exchange for his silence.

¶17. (C) Paradoxically, Adesanya rated Buhari as a loser despite winning the ANPP nomination. With Babangida sidelined, the ANPP governors pushed the nomination to Buhari. Although they knew he had little chance in the general election, he is popular in the North. The ANPP governors, all from northern states, figured Buhari's popularity in their region would have a bandwagon effect and help their reelection. In short, Buhari was but the sacrificial lamb for their gubernatorial ambitions.

What Next

¶18. (C) Adesanya said that Obasanjo/Atiku were confidently looking forward to the general election. However, the PDP could still have problems in the South-South unless Obasanjo made peace with the coastal states on the volatile issue of offshore oil revenues. Also, they needed to make amends with Ekweume and other Igbos to keep the Southeast as a PDP stronghold and prevent it from splitting its vote among the several Igbo candidates in the minor parties. Adesanya felt Babangida would further withdraw from open political engagement and not chance additional setbacks. However, Babangida is faced with the prospect of either his stiffest political competitor, Atiku, returning for another four years, or of Buhari, his arch-enemy, ascending to the Presidency. (Adesanya scoffed at suggestions that Babangida and Buhari had reconciled. On his return to Minna from Sokoto where he met Buhari, Babangida shrugged of his session with Buhari as a non-event.)

¶19. (C) Uncomfortable with this "lose-lose" situation, Babangida could pursue a third option. Although not likely, Babangida might encourage an alliance of the minor parties against Obasanjo, particularly if a figure like Ekweume could be coaxed to publicly spearhead this effort.

Comment

¶20. (C) As we have stated previously (Reftel), we will never learn the whole truth regarding the PDP and ANPP conventions. By giving us the view from Atiku's vantage point, however, Adesanya has provided more pieces of the complex puzzle. Adesanya's account is believable but it is also biased. An associate of Atiku and Babangida, Adesanya is an astute businessman who persistently gauges where his bread will receive the most butter. Thus, he inclines more heavily toward Atiku these days. In his rendition, Adesanya conveniently glossed over the fact that Atiku wanted the Presidency and had unsuccessfully searched for a mechanism to oust Obasanjo without incurring his wrath. Only when that search proved fruitless, did Atiku cast his lot with Obasanjo. Additionally, Adesanya assigned no role to Atiku in the governor's rebellion. We find this implausible.

¶21. (C) Atiku likely encouraged NSA Mohammed to go behind Obasanjo's back to the governors. This would be consistent with the objective of deceiving Babangida. Atiku probably continued to harbor a splinter of hope that the governor's rebellion would send Obasanjo packing. Atiku's counsel to Obasanjo to retain Mohammed despite the latter's trespasses is more understandable in this light. Mohammed might tell Obasanjo about Atiku's role. Moreover, as long as Mohammed is around, Obasanjo's suspicions would focus more on the NSA than on the Vice President.

¶22. (C) Adesanya's rating of relative winners and losers seems on point. However, Obasanjo adherence to his promise to give the domestic portfolio to Atiku may not be as ironclad as Adesanya thinks. While somewhat chastened,

Obasanjo still has his bark and plenty of bite. We would not be surprised to see him "forget" some of his convention concessions if he wins the general election. Obasanjo also may someday "punish" Atiku for his humiliation.

123. (C) Last, we agree with Adesanya that January was unkind to Babangida. Late last year, the media depicted him as a mastermind who influenced five of the then six parties. At least three parties were pining for him to announce his candidacy under their banner. Now, he faces either Atiku or Buhari, two enemies, as the second or the first most powerful person in the country, respectively. Atiku is no boy scout; his role in eroding the Babangida myth was clearly in his own self-interest. However, Atiku has helped stabilize politics at the national level by not breaking up the PDP ticket. Moreover, by cutting Babangida down to size, this could encourage politicians in the opposition that their path to success lie more in working together than in making the trek to Minna to seek Babangida's favor.

JETER